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ABSTRACT

An immersed reading of Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" reveals a living language informed inevitably by extrinsic circumstance. As an imperfect product of Ellison's own Enlightenment kind of thought--his idea that concepts and texts divorce themselves from social agendas--such a reading reveals a truth of another sort quite unintentionally. Not only the source for one mythic code, for a superficial literacy, or for the reading of only plot or the democratic code before us, the text provides an opportunity to teach the repressed code that neither the narrative voice nor the authorial one would ever concede. True literacy becomes the literate power of a humane life. The novel's rich complexes of image and metaphor disclose a meaning of self and history. From the Edenic world of the black southern school to which the unnamed narrator has won a scholarship, he is expelled into the wasteland of experience. His linear movement toward the North, and toward a personal search for self-meaning, parallels that of the reader toward the closure of the novel. Though withdrawal on the narrator's part means continued slavery, literate engagement could mean new freedom. For Ellison, as for any other great artist, the deepest literacy would demand the imprint of one's own fiction on American history. (NKA)

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A Deeper Literacy: Teaching Invisible Man From Aboriginal Ground

By R. Baxter Miller

Play the game, but don't believe in it---that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a straight jacket or a padded cell...(118)

"Just tell him that I
said the grass is green..."
"What?"
"The grass is green. It's our secret code, he'll understand." (81)

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Lately it has become fashionable, as championed by such studies as *The Reconstruction of Instruction* (MLA 1978), *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Illinois 1979), and *Chant of the Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature* (Illinois 1979), to read and teach Ellison's text as a structural achievement in Euro-American literacy. The lofty tone suggests the unquestioned righteousness which has often beset teachers of Freshman English, many of whom have envisioned themselves as christened and erudite knights beating back the illiterate charge of the philistines. They fear the danger of the mass media and popular culture--radio, cassettes, computers, and television-- as infringing upon the prerogatives of high culture dangerously. And so they have robed their pedagogical idiom in the almost sacred voice of the back-to-basics surge in

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writing and education. What happens consequently is not that they are so much misdirected, for they are motivated indeed by the highest and most admirable aims, as somewhat regrettably myopic .

The power of *Invisible Man*, according to them and others, emerges from am ideological affinity to the *Declaration of Independence*, the master text of American society. In such a view Ellison is one of the greatest and most literate American authors because he completes the emblematic and aesthetic *tradition* (and apparently there's only one) of Emerson, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner. But it is possible to question the theory behind such belief and assertion. In such a way we can do more than value, or indeed even love the Euro-American mythos on our own terms, but it itself still becomes as dubious as the supposedly empirical history of American culture and the West. Admittedly such a reading goes far beyond the ideological conservatism of Ellison himself, a position I suspect, which has led to the important reassessment of his masterpiece during the eighties, as the national commitment to Civil Rights "boomerangs" backward to the suppression of the early fifties.

But the point is not to dwell here on the theoretical and political assumptions of the academy itself (though it is necessary imperatively to read them suspiciously), as to clarify the deeper reading *Invisible Man* calls for. It is a calling neither as a superficially brilliant reading of grammar, nor of the way the scenes are linguistically bound together, nor only of the structure which ties each part to the whole so well. A deeper reading hardly comes through the belief that engagement with the text is only linearly spatial, moving from the grandfather at the beginning, through the scene in which a black couple is evicted impersonally from a apartment in

the middle, once more to the grandfather's saying at the end. A deeper reader emerges, on the contrary, through a final awareness that space is vertical and temporal as well as linear and horizontal. Deep space involves, in other words, consciousness and culture. Profound reading confirms the vitality of a literacy inseparable from rhetorical history, inseparable, in other words, from the academic and political interests prescribing a democratic language and "literate" canon. For most of us us the pressure to teach only the accepted literacy is far greater than we confess.

For *Invisible Man*, an immersed reading reveals not a dead museum, as Stepto suggests, but a living language informed by extrinsic circumstance which inform it inevitably. As an imperfect product of Ellison's own Enlightenment kind of thought- his idea that concepts and texts divorce themselves from social agendas- such a reading reveals a truth of another sort quite unintentionally. Not only the source for one mythic code, for a superficial literacy, or for the reading of only plot or the democratic code before us, the text provides an opportunity to teach the repressed code which neither the narrative voice nor the authorial one would ever concede. Hence, true literacy becomes not only the contemplative awareness and cowardly escape from the fictions which others would impose upon us but the assertion of our own fiction, namely the literate power of a humane life, so as to redefine the conceptual and cultural dictates of our world. True literacy becomes dynamic.

It is only rudimentary to recall a basic reading for teaching *Invisible Man.* The unnamed narrator, having distinguished himself as a young orator and blind believer in the accomodationist principles of the late Booker T. Washington, wins a scholarship to a Black college in the South.

Trusted to entertain Mr. Norton, a white philanthropist of the school, he takes him to the wrong side of the tracks across a white line in the highway. There he meets with Trueblood who has impregnated his daughter, Matty Lou, during a nightmare. Afterwards the storyteller takes the anxious Norton, who has repressed his hidden lusts for his own daughter to the Golden Day, a saloon overseen by authoritative Supercargo (Freudian superego) then literally down and out. Subsequently expelled by Bledsoe, one of many grandfather figures (grandfather himself, Norton, Trueblood, and Supercargo, Wrestrum and Tarp) the invisible man, with sealed and damaging letters of recommendation from Bledsoe, makes his way optimistically to Harlem. There, after a stirring speech at the eviction of a couple from a Harlem tenement, he is recruited by the Brotherhood, a fictional counterpart to the communist party. Duped into being part of a race riot indirectly, he withdraws into the basement of a sewer from which he taps light from the power company. After Ras and his henchmen have given up the death search for him, he anticipates a return to the surface world.

But such an overview hardly does justice to the rich complexes of image and metaphor which disclose a meaning of self and history . From the Edenic world of the school he has fallen initially into the waste land of experience. Here he has found man to be nearly overwhelmed by the machine in the boiler division of the Liberty Paint factory as well as by the political mechanism of the Brotherhood at the end of the book. Now covering his figurative scars from a fiery initiation into political reality during the "spring" of his life, he lives on. But he has learned to smell the "stench" of death by the end. His linear movement toward the North, and

toward a personal search for self-meaning, parallels that of the reader toward the closure of the novel.

But even Ellison himself has given the structuralists a painless excuse to read the novel only grammatically:

> Today we hear much discussion of what is termed "black English," a concept unheard of during my school days. And yet we were all the grandchildren of slaves and most of us spoke in the idioms that were native to the regions from which our families had migrated. Still, no one, much less our teachers,suggested that standard American English was beyond us; how could they with such examples as Dr. Page [first Black Ph.D. from Brown University] before us? He could make the language of Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible resound...

Would it help to quibble about the insensitivity to Western expansionism here, including the genocide of the once Native Americans? Such remarks, though repressed throughout Ellison's works and comments, derive from his belief in part that the Frontier and Huckleberry Finn symbolize "our" culture.

But the letters which Bledsoe gives the invisible man provoke a more profound reading of a text bound to history inextricably. "That's all right," Bledsoe says to the narrator, "The school tries to look out for its own." Because the letters are sealed confidentially, the storyteller must not open

them if he wants help. Says he, "I took off my coat and hat and took my packet of letters and lay back upon the bed drawing a feeling of importance from reading the important names. What was inside, and how could I open them undetected." (124) Though he knows that Bledsoe despises him for lack of foresight on his part, and though he knows that each prospective employer from Mr. Bates through Mr. Emerson (a well-chosen name indeed for Ralph Waldo Ellison) has turned him down, he simply cannot connect the literate *form* of the letter to Bledsoe's *agenda* to "keep this nigger boy running." His enslavement to the shape of literacy deprives him of wisdom.

Even by itself the eviction scene serves in detail to sharpen the distinction between graphically literate space (Museums, the portrait of Douglass) and temporally literate space (Barrelhouse blues). Here the crowd surges as a white man, knocking over a drawer which spills the contents at the narrator's feet, comes back past. Beside a bent Masonic emblem are a set of tarnished cuff links and three brass rings. Here also are a nail-pierced dime to be worn as a good luck charm and an ornate greeting card which reads "Grandma I love you" in a child's hand. Another card, with the picture of a white in black face, shows the singer seated at a cabin door from which he strums "Going back to my old cabin home." Here are a "string of bright glass beads with a tarnished clasp," a rabbit foot and a celluloid baseball card "shaped like a catcher's mit, registering a game won or lost years ago." Here are an "old breast pump with rubber bulb yellowed with age" as well as a worn baby shoe and a lock of infant hair tied in a faded as well as crumbled blue ribbon. The narrator, nauseated by the encounter, holds three lapsed insurance policies in his hand. As an initial

climax, he clasps a newspaper portrait which "yellowed" like the previous bulb is probably worn or "tarnished" like the links: "MARCUS GARVEY [proponent of a United States of Africa in 1922] DEPORTED." Turning away now, the narrator searches the dirty snow for anything which his eyes may have missed. His fingers close upon something resting on a "frozen footstep," the emblem of Black American progress. The fragile paper, deteriorating from age, is written in once black ink now yellow. He reads: "FREE PAPERS. *Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859. Signed: John Samuels. Macon...*" Invisible Man, folding it quickly to blot out the single drop of melted snow from a yellow page, drops the paper back into the drawer. With trembling hands, he rasps for breath as if he has run for a long distance or come upon a coiled snake on a busy street. Though he had rationalized to himself that slavery was farther in the past, he knew that it hadn't been so. Having replaced the drawer in the chest, he pushes to the curb drunkenly:

> But it wouldn't come up, only a bitter spurt of gall filled my mouth and splattered the old folk's possessions. I turned and stared again at the jumble, **no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and long-ago**, not so much of my own memory as of *remembered words*, of linked verbal echoes, images, *heard even when not listening* at *home*. (207) [My emphases]

However valuable any structural and formalistic literacy may be, it takes a profoundly cultural understanding to reveal the brilliance here. In 1847 the "Masons" had become the First Independent African Grand Lodge, and only in 1947, the year marking the first copyright of *Invisible Man*, would Jackie Robinson be allowed finally to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers. His success marked the beginning in the desegregation of major league baseball. While the "fragile paper" of freedom once had useful value, it has only a sentimental one now. But at least the narrator has the prospects of self-expression still.

What Robert Stepto would probably teach as the major strength of the novel is instead the most pervasive flaw:

> Ellison achieves such a strategy when he makes it clear that his narrator has found a way not only to stop paying for his life within what other men call reality, but also to avoid paying for his enlightenment once he has fallen outside those imposing fictions. The former discovery releases him as Du Bois and others are not released from various rhetorics of progress; the latter discovery allows him to gain as few others have gained a rhetoric of liberation. (141)

Actually it takes more self-determination and commitment on our part to imprint our own fiction and style on reality than to live the other way around. (And yes, I understand what "willing suspension of disbelief" means...). In so doing the teacher or artist achieves a more positive fiction

in the world rather than a cowardly one *below* it. While Stepto has the relationship between the narrative self and the world superbly correct, the value he places upon the bond requires a complete reversal. Though withdrawal on the narrator's part means continued slavery, literate engagement could mean new freedom. Perhaps, we take our chances.

For Ellison, as for any other great artist, the deepest literacy would demand the imprint of one's own fiction on American history. But the author must attempt to repress the truth still coded there, and most American critics, if the current scholarship is telling at all, read the presence there of nearly every writer in the "major canon," except that of Henry David Thoreau. Perhaps, the last does indeed protest the rules too much. What almost everyone seems to have made taboo as much as Ellison has is that an American Revolution did indeed happen once. It broke with the King's English literally as well as figuratively. But the final odyssey toward literacy is neither a test of such literary skill nor even a quality of mind so much as the critical will to know as well as face the truth. It is a test of courage: "I got up from behind the hedge in the waning moon, wet and shaken..." (426)

Todd Clifton, once a youth organizer for the brotherhood in Harlem, had already disturbed the narrator regarding such literate risks before:

> "No," ... "he [Ras, the Exhorter not yet turned Ras, the Destroyer] won't get on the Inside. Did you hear how he was talking? Did you hear what he was saying?"

> "I heard him, sure," I said.
>
> "I don't know," he said. "I suppose sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history...."
>
> "What?"
>
> Plunge outside, turn his back... Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts."
>
> "I didn't answer. Maybe he's right, I thought, and was suddenly very glad I had found brotherhood." (285)

Having aggravated the Brotherhood, Clifton would end up selling Sambo dolls, and Ras would be a caricature riding his horse pathetically as some burlesque knight in modern times. What none of the three (Clifton, Ras, or narrator) would ever manage is precisely the challenge Clifton had seen as being possible in a fleeting moment . None of them, in other words, could remain within history and imprint a new fiction upon it, at least without turning to violence or bringing down destruction upon themselves.

But Frederick Douglass, whose print Brother Tarp had hung on the narrator's wall at the brotherhood, had done precisely so. He was not necessarily a greater writer than Ellison, for hardly anyone is on the basis of a single novel, but he was a far greater man than Ellison's speaker could dream of being. Through the fight with Covey and the great orations, every bit as much as through the pictorial space of his autobiographical texts, he transformed himself from object into subject. His literate life confirmed what Gwendolyn Brooks would write more than a century later: "Say that the River turns and turn the River." But even Ellison's speaker cannot

manage such living literacy at the end. After Clifton's death, he wonders about three youths in front of him:

> They were men out of time-unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time who would soon be gone and forgotten... What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the whole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand... (333)

In teaching the close of *Invisible Man*, it is helpful to recall a story which Jacques Derrida tells about the flight of an arrow. Were we to take several pictures of the shot, none could possibly reveal what motion itself is. Such invisible charge in language makes literary narrators visible to themselves and visible to their worlds, and the last simply must account for their articulate presence in the end. Such invisible dynamism (but certainly no invisible man) distinguishes the narratives of Douglass, Du Bois, Wright, and Morrison often. It is this *process* in language which gives their texts an indelible force missed at the close of *Invisible Man*.

In no way should the teaching of such weaknesses tarnish the recognition of Ellison's American masterpiece. But the significance of such inquiry directs us to ask not only about the greatness of its literary form but about the substance and consequences at hand. Having fostered a deeper literacy, we could confront the danger which the current teaching and scholarship pose. Is it better, in other words, to appreciate the text for a Black American suspicion about American democracy, to face a truth which Ellison tries to purge from his own novel unsuccessfully? Shall we teach the text as only an admirable Afro-American fiction on Euro-American terms? Who now are the bearers of the text? Whom do they serve? Such critical inquiries, the *processes* of verbal fluency, emerge from aboriginal ground so well.

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